

Ex-offenders prepare for life after prison

State agencies, community groups, health care professionals and volunteers joined together Tuesday for the "Summit of Hope," an ex-offender reintegration expo.



Robert Woodson, center, was among barbers volunteering Tuesday to give haircuts to ex-offenders during the Illinois Department of Corrections' "A Summit of Hope" event in the Orr Building at the Illinois State Fairgrounds. Photo by Justin L. Fowler/The State Journal-Register

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State agencies, community groups, health care professionals and volunteers joined together Tuesday for the "Summit of Hope," an ex-offender reintegration expo organized and run by the Illinois Department of Corrections.

The all-day event was held in the Orr Building on the Illinois State Fairgrounds.

Aimed at reducing the number of offenders who return to prison, the expo gathers public and private service agencies, banks and even barbers under one roof to provide a one-stop station where ex-offenders and parolees can start the task of re-entering normal life.

"We make sure that people have all the resources they need to collectively reintegrate back into society," Summit of Hope statewide coordinator Marcus King said.

He said the parolees who come to the events, held all over the state, always have positive attitudes.

"They're being helped. They have resources. A lot of times it's hard to react negatively when people are committed to helping you. And that's what this is about, commitment," he said.

In one area, volunteer barbers from Genesis Barber & Beauty Shop in Springfield were busy giving haircuts. That's where Derrick Sims, 26, of Chicago, sat waiting.

He's on parole after doing five years in prison for aggravated robbery.

"It's a good thing knowing people care and want to help people move to the next level," Sims said. "I feel great about it."

Sims said taking this next step is "something I've never done before," but when asked if he was ready, he said, "Yes, sir."

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The Orr Building was jammed with booths ranging from clinics giving free diabetes and HIV exams, banks helping to open accounts, housing agencies lining up living arrangements, employers helping with job applications, vendors offering second-hand clothing, church groups recruiting new members and even a secretary of state's booth printing state ID cards and driver's licenses

DOC communications director Tom Shaer said the expos, now in their third year, are held 15 to 20 times annually throughout Illinois and typically draw about 300 parolees each.



Jennifer Sergent, left, and Jaleesa Davis, both with the Springfield Urban League's Urban Youth Empowerment Program, talk with an ex-offender at their booth during the event. Photo by Justin L. Fowler/The State Journal-Register

Shaer said the Summit for Hope helps execute one part of the department's dual mission, making sure offenders who've completed their obligations to the state are able to function on their own.

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"Number one, we keep people in jail who deserve to be there. Keep them away from society," he said. "Number two, those who are coming out, prepare them before they leave and help them after they leave."

Shaer called the initiative "one of the most successful programs DOC has ever done."

"We're trying to help them not be re-offenders, and that's the whole key," he said. "A successfully re-entered ex-offender helps to ensure a safer society. That's our job here."

"We bring it all in one spot. Here it is all at once."